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ABSTRACT

The hypothesis that different communication patterns would be found in South African families with children of high and low social competence was tested on a sample of 36 white families with 5-year-old preschool children. The communication patterns of 18 families with children of high social competence, as assessed by preschool teachers, were compared with those of 18 families with children of low social competence. In each family, interaction between the child and his or her parents was generated by a series of five relatively simple tasks; interaction was coded and analyzed according to Bales' Interaction Process Analysis. As hypothesized, significant differences in the communication patterns of the two groups of families were found. Discussion specifies aspects of effective and ineffective communication, and profiles ways children with high and low social competence are socially educated and miseducated by parents at home. Educational implications of the findings for children's acquisition of social competence are pointed out. (RH)

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FAMILY COMMUNICATION PATTERNS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL COMPETENCE IN PRESCHOOL CHILDREN

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INTRODUCTION

Any community has a responsibility to its members and to itself to ensure the effective education of future citizens who will be of value to the community while at the same time experiencing personal fulfilment. One way in which this responsibility can be expressed is in the provision of adequate guidance to parents so that they may acquit themselves of their educational task to the benefit of all.

To become competent in today's society is not easy. The competent adult should possess the knowledge and skills required to help rather than hinder others. He should also recognize his own limitations and therefore choose his goals wisely and not disturb his own inner stability by putting too much pressure on himself. In all this the adult must retain his own identity but at the same time be committed to others.

The human being is one who exists, indeed must exist in a social setting and therefore, he needs to be able to do that as well as possible. Since he needs help in learning to co-exist, the educational task is clear. He requires guidance towards being able and willing to build relationships with individual others, in private and in public, as well as in the larger group known as society, on the level required by modern conditions.

THE ROLE OF THE FAMILY

This brings the social aim of education sharply into focus, that is, the guiding of the child towards meaningful co-existence with others, accompanying him to a point where he can be mobile within society and cope with its demands. In short, preparing the child for his role as a socially competent adult.

The demands on the individual today are greater than in the more tranquil past and thus the demands on the education of the child are also far higher and more challenging.

Education towards social competence takes place in co-existence with others. For the young child, this brings the family sharply into focus and there is plentiful evidence to suggest that where the fundamental educational relationship is faulty or inadequate, the acquisition of social competence will be hampered. On the other hand, an educational environment which is supportive offers the child an orientation into the world he lives in and he learns early on in life that the world is there to be explored and mastered (Bloom et al, 1965).

It is the family social unit, in particular, which affords the child both the time and the space to practice his social skills and experiment with an ever-widening range of situations. However, a sound educational relationship within the family implies what Botha (1977) has called

"togetherness" and a vital element of this togetherness is the communication which takes place between educator and educand. Indeed, education cannot take place without it. (Pretorius, 1979).

Communication within families, and especially between parents and child, may reasonably be regarded as an expression of the way in which parents exercise their educational task, and effective communication would therefore indicate a sound educational relationship. If the degree of social competence exhibited by the child is regarded as a reflection of the realization of the social aim of education, then it could be expected that considerable differences would be found in the communication patterns of families with children with high and low social competence.

This hypothesis was tested on a sample of 36 white families with 5-year-old preschool children by comparing the communication patterns of 18 families with children of high social competence (as assessed by preschool teachers) with those of 18 families with children of low social competence (Fullard, 1981).

In each family, interaction between the child and his/her parents was generated by a series of five relatively simple tasks and the interaction thus obtained was coded and analyzed according to the Bales' Interaction Process Analysis.

Significant differences in the communication patterns of these families were indeed, found.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION (Kirstein, 1977).

In the families which had preschoolers with high social competence, it was found that communication was effective and the educational situation thus created was a sound one. It was found that these families realized the essential elements of human communication; for example:

- There was adequate expression of positive and negative feelings, including the possibility of being able to gauge the feelings of the other participant.

- The possibility of realizing a great variety of actions, feelings and ideas was present.

- There was recognition of the other, indicating that the other person was understood.

- The life-situation of the other was considered in a rational manner.

- All compulsion was removed and there was no risk in communicating with the other. This meant that communication was voluntary and conducted in an atmosphere of security and trust.

- The discourse took the form of a two-way dialogue in which mutual influencing and personality development took place.

INEFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION (Kirstein, 1977).

The families with preschoolers with low social competence on the other hand, manifested many of the forms of ineffective communication; as for example:

- The parents expressed negative feelings towards the child and were unable or unwilling to empathize with the child's situation. In such cases, the child was likely to feel inferior, not accepted, insecure, lonely and anxious.

- The parents dictated while the child merely passively obeyed the, with little or no exchange of ideas or opinions.

- The parents were authoritarian and unbending, continuously driving the child towards achieving what for him were improbable (and often impossible) goals.

- Child and parent tended to use each other for achieving their own ends without respect for the dignity of the other as human being.

- The parents lacked understanding for what it is to be a child, and, especially the possibilities of the particular child in question.

- The parents conducted a monologue, coaching and drilling the child for a desired performance, with little chance for the child to use his own initiative.

- Communication was forced and not spontaneous and natural, preventing the child from being truly himself.

EDUCATIONAL PROFILES

In summarizing the results obtained from the study it was possible to sketch educational profiles of the child with high and low social competence.

The child with low social competence finds himself in a family situation in which there is little opportunity for him to use his initiative and actualize his own unique potential. He receives instructions which he carries out without being given adequate openings to make plans on his own. There is a strong suggestion of a lack of the distance which is so necessary between a child and his educators. Such a situation resembles one of over-protection and indulgence particularly on the part of the mother. This child seems to be allowed to dominate the family conversation far more than his highly competent counterparts.

That this situation is not satisfactory to the child is indicated by the negative emotion he shows to his father and the aggression and defensiveness he shows to his mother.

The communication in the family of the child with low social competence could be termed ineffective, and as a result, the child could be called educationally handicapped. In this particular study the handicap manifests itself in the inadequate acquisition of social mobility or social competence.

Contrary to this, the child with high social competence enjoys the acceptance and understanding of his parents. There is warmth, yet there is also discipline and loving authority.

Certain demands are made on the child to use his own initiative but these demands are realistic, and the child can answer this appeal to explore because he trusts his parents. There appears to be a balance maintained between protection and exposure so that the child can gradually acquire social mobility.

In the communication in the family, the ncessary distance between educator and child is maintained while at the same time recognizing and making provision for the child's taking his rightful place as fellow member of the family. He is granted the opportunity to express himself and assert himself within the safe confines of the family as well as to explore reality beyond it, within the limits provided by his parents.

He learns the valuable lessons of co-operation and mutual support, and by being allowed to use his own initiative, he discovers his talents, strengths and weaknesses. By the same token he learns task acceptance and to take responsibility for the completion of that task.

In these families the communication patterns provided evidence of the realization of the essentials of effective human communication, and thus also the realization of the essential educational relationship of trust, understanding and authority. The educational situation in such families could be described as healthy or sound and the effectiveness of the education which takes place within it is demonstrated by the degree of social competence achieved by the children.

The results of the study seem to indicate that these families provide the child with the opportunity to move gradually from the intimacy of the family to the more formal world beyond. He is allowed to handle situations in his own way under the guidance of his parents so that his skill can increase to the extent that he will be able to cope adequately with the infinite variety of situations that he is likely to encounter in the adult world. Such parents appear to understand the value of maintaining a balance between protection from and exposure to, life-situations for their child.

They realize that they cannot allow their child to be overwhelmed by the varying and confusing influences of society and must thus select those situations in which their child should be able to test his coping skills with a fair chance of success. Through effective co-existence in the family, the child is gradually guided towards co-existence with others, and his acquisition of social competence is facilitated.

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

The basic problem in the acquisition of social competence appears to lie in the successful implementation of skills, both intellectual and social, by the individual himself. The meaning of a person's talents and skills for himself is vital, since the meaning he attributes to them will determine whether he will work at their actualization or not. The central factor appears to be the inculcation of values into the person's life - values which will lend direction to his life. These values, although accepted on a personal basis must also blend harmoniously with those of the community of which the person is a member.

The development of social competence implies education in the fullest sense of the word. It has as its task the creation of healthy inclinations so that the child will assume responsibility for the proper utilization of his talents and the realization that talent and responsibility increase relative to each other.

Moreover, the education of the child must be directed towards the awakening of the will to develop and use his talents.

The uniqueness of the child must be taken into account in the development of social competence. The educator should aim at the way in which an individual attaches value to his talents and at making the child receptive to the values and needs of the community. When these factors are the central concern, education in its broadest sense is implied. Inclinations and talents must be nurtured and created so that the capacities will emerge to enable man to fulfil his proper role in life.

The starting point must inevitably be the individual child within his family. The parents, in the first place, must create in him a sense of direction and value-system which will direct him spontaneously to his personal future in which his talents will be used to best advantage, governed by accepted responsibility, and will take into account the great variety of communal tasks which are there to be performed.

Since the primary educational situation of the family has a decisive role to play in the creation of indispensable pre-conditions (especially at the preschool stage) for becoming a useful and responsible member of society,

it is of vital importance that high ideals should be fostered through the offering of parent guidance, particularly for parents of preschool children.

There is no doubt that parents should be made aware of the necessity for effective communication with their children and be systematically instructed in the essential requirements of a healthy educational relationship, and helped towards better understanding the needs of their child.

It should be seen as one of the most important tasks of the community to ensure that adequate facilities exist for guiding young parents in the fulfilment of their educational responsibilities. In so doing, the competence of its future adults will be promoted as will higher realization of individual potential. Without this, society cannot function effectively, neither can the individual within that society give full realization to his life.

In short, then, improving education in co-existence, education towards co.existence with others will also be facilitated. It is suggested that a small investment on the part of the community in the form of parent guidance programmes would reap multiple dividends.

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